
THE
Lord Bishop of BRISTOL's
S E R M O N
Before the RIGHT HONOURABLE
House of LORDS,

On Friday, February 13, 1761.

Die Lunæ, 16 Feb. 1761.

Ordered,

BY the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in Parliament assembled, That the Thanks of this House be, and are hereby, given to the Lord Bishop of *Bristol*, for the Sermon by him preached before this House on *Friday* last, in the Abby-Church, *Westminster*; and he is hereby desired to cause the same to be forthwith printed and published.

Ashley Cowper, Cler. Parliamentor.

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A
S E R M O N

Preached before the
L O R D S Spiritual and Temporal
IN THE
ABBY-CHURCH, WESTMINSTER,
O N

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1761.

Being the DAY appointed by his
MAJESTY'S PROCLAMATION
FOR A

General FAST and HUMILIATION.

K Yonge BY
PHILIP, Lord Bishop of BRISTOL.

L O N D O N:

Printed for JOHN WHISTON and BENJ. WHITE, at
Mr. Boyle's Head, in Fleet-Street.
MDCCLXI.

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PROVERBS XXI. 30, 31.

There is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against the Lord. The horse is prepared against the day of battle: but safety is of the Lord.

A Full persuasion of, and an entire confidence in Divine Providence, is the foundation of all our prayers for blessings private or national; it being most vain and senseless to make our addresses to the throne of God, unless we believe Him always superintending, and always directing the affairs of this world; having so ordered the stated course of nature, as that in its regular operations it shall answer His general purposes; yet sometimes more immediately making visible His over-ruling power, in the disposing of those great events, which produce the prosperity or adversity, the glory or decay of mighty nations.

The Old Testament containeth an instructive account of that most extraordinary Providence of God, which He manifested in the government and protection of His chosen people. And because Solomon had seen many signal marks of the divine interposition, it is probable

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that several of his proverbial sentences may have more immediate relation to the Jewish state than to the more general experience of the world.

Thus the words now before us cannot but call to our minds the particular promises of God, to be on the side of that people, when if engaged in war they should be in an actual state of obedience to His positive injunctions; to those injunctions especially of not multiplying their horses for battle, like other nations. Yet no proposition can be more simply and absolutely true than that of the Text, that *there is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord*, and that although *the horse is prepared against the battle, yet safety is of the Lord*. This followeth, as a necessary inference, from the Omnipresence and other infinite perfections of God; which not only imply (in opposition to the foolish philosophy of old times) the truth of a Divine Providence, but should teach us to look up to it for assistance, as men and as citizens, with the strongest assurance of our being under the protection and care of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness.

What then is it which reason and scripture teach us concerning a point of so great importance, and upon which so much must depend? Now the Omnipresence of God may be considered in a view merely philosophical, or in a view much more interesting, extending itself to our religious concerns. We may understand by it the actual existence of the Deity in every point of
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Infinite space; or we may understand by it, that by some incomprehensible means God is present with us in spirit, so as to view the actions and penetrate all the thoughts of man; and in which-so-ever of these ways we consider that divine perfection, there are abundant testimonies for the confirmation of it.

That absolute necessity of existence, by which God IS in all times, holds equally true in regard to all places, and serves to demonstrate His unlimited presence in the fullest and most ample manner. And the same may be evinced sufficiently to all religious purposes, even from the consideration of our own nature. For we are all conscious that we are dependant and accountable; dependant upon the power of God for our Being, and accountable to His justice for our behaviour; so that, as sure as there is a Being to whom we are accountable, so sure it is that He must be so far present with us as perfectly to know every one of our deeds, words, or thoughts: and again, as sure as our existence is but the continued effect of the same constant and never-failing cause, the will and power of the Deity, so sure it is that that cause can never be virtually absent from us.

And although speculations of this kind are not consistent with the employments of and want of leisure in some, nor adapted to the capacities of others, yet holy writ is open to all, and doth most plainly make known to us, and most strongly urge upon us the same important truth.

When Solomon the King dedicated the temple which he had built—but (said he) *will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven, and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee.*—The word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah saith—*Am I a God at hand and not afar off? Do not I fill heaven and earth?*—So likewise St. Paul, preaching to the Athenians, tells them, that God *would have all nations seek Him, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him, though (saith he) He be not far from every one of us; for in Him we live, and move, and have our Being.* Nor can there be a more explicit testimony imagined than that psalm of David, equally pious and sublime—*O Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me; thou knowest my down-sitting and mine up-rising; thou understandest my thought afar off; thou compassedst my path and my lying-down, and art acquainted with all my ways.* Here, in the opening of his hymn, the good king acknowledgeth himself beset on all sides by the presence of God, extending itself all around us upon earth, reaching to our walks abroad and retirements at home, and from which neither the business of the day nor the privacy of the night can screen us. But warmed with the thought he pursues it still farther. In his imagination he becomes capable of soaring to the greatest height above the surface of the earth, of sinking down towards its centre, of flying to its utmost borders, yet not of avoiding the presence of God. *If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell,*
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(in the depths, that is, of the earth) *behold, thou art there: if I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.* There are no possible dimensions that can bound thee. Thou fillest immensity of length, breadth, and depth. *Whither then shall I go from thy spirit, or whither shall I flee from thy presence?*

Thus reason and scripture teach us, that we are constantly under the all-seeing eye of God. Can we suppose now, that God, infinitely wise and powerful, will be as it were a careless and inactive spectator of his own works? indifferent to their good or ill, or even to their preservation? infinitely happy in himself, and, upon that very account, inattentive to the happiness of His creatures? can we suppose Him happy without goodness? powerful without activity? and wise to no end? Surely not only the constant presence of God, but His providential care of His creation must be essentially connected with His Being. And yet it hath been strangely concluded, that the wise and happy Deity will not interfere in, will not busy itself with matters so poor and so trifling as every thing in this world must be deemed. So that although God should be in some sense present with us, yet He will not, He cannot condescend to take notice of our actions.

This false and irrational opinion is of very antient date. It was maintained, in the whole or in its parts, by persons
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eminent in the studies of philosophy. It hath been adorned by all the charms of poetry which the powers of the most lively imagination could draw together. It was supported by the dissolute examples of the great and wealthy amongst the Greeks and Romans. Would to heaven it had stopped there! there, where such an error had some appearance of excuse; where they were not only without the glorious light of the Gospel, but where even the best understandings could not but be excessively weakened by various systems of atheism or polytheism, superstition and idolatry; where men were tossed to and fro with every wind of vain philosophy, and likely to pursue with steadiness and constancy that course only which their passions and corrupt inclinations might point out to them. But unfortunately it hath not stopped there. Even with all the advantages which we of later ages might enjoy, we have yet had deplorable experience of the predominancy of vice, which still flatters itself with the hopes of impunity, self-satisfied with the same kind of vain notions, and the same empty and unmeaning words.

There is certainly nothing, even in appearance the most minute amongst the works of God, but what must be of real value, because it must answer some end of real importance, although we neither yet have been, and perhaps never shall be acquainted with it. We learn this from our notions of the perfect wisdom of God, which maketh nothing in vain, but hath some
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gracious design in the formation of every thing visible and invisible.

Divine creation gives a dignity to every production. Amongst men we esteem children on account of their parents; the works of art for the fame of the artificer; and if in these cases we are frequently wrong, yet we can never mistake in looking with awe and admiration upon every production of the great Father and Maker of the worlds. To know therefore in what light we ought to view every thing about us, let us only ask ourselves who made them.

And if God in His wisdom and goodness made them, it is impossible to assign any tolerable reason against His continual and providential care of them. If there was in His nature nothing to prevent His creating them, there can be nothing to prevent His having a guardian eye over them. On the other hand, the great improvements in natural enquiries have abundantly confirmed even the necessity of a perpetual Providence, to which the succession of every animal and vegetable part of the universe is as much owing as their original formation, and without which not even the parts of a common pebble could stick together. Take away the overruling and all-supporting hand of God, and all the variety, beauty, and order of the world would revert into confusion.

For us in particular, we have, besides the light of improved philosophy, the still more valuable light of
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true religion, to teach us that mankind at least is of some value in the eye of their Creator, who condescended to send His Son from heaven to secure their final happiness; and for His present care of them we have the same Saviour's testimony. God hath commanded us to hear Him, and He tells us, that *of five sparrows, which are sold for two farthings only, not one of them is forgotten before God; and even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*

As this Epicurean objection to Providence, founded in the infinite happiness of God and the contemptible opinion which men affect to entertain of themselves and the rest of the visible world, is big with inconsistencies, so also is that which bad men farther urge from the moral perfections of their Creator. When they say that His goodness is such, that (upon supposition of His really inspecting every thing upon earth) He must be led, of necessity, to curb or prevent bad actions, what is this but to advance their folly into impiety, to finish their wickedness with blasphemy, and to turn every thing that is wretched in themselves into arguments against their God? The necessity of liberty in moral agents affords a rational answer to this. But the testimony of scripture is clear and explicit, that we actually are aided by the silent influences of the holy Spirit, turning us from evil actions; and making a way for us to escape from dangerous temptations. We cannot tell, indeed, when, and how this is done. Possibly pain and anxiety;
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possibly the gentle reproof of a friend; possibly what appear to be mere accidental thoughts of our own, may each of them be the gracious interposition of God himself. And certainly the turpitude and final misery of sin are most manifestly set forth to deter us from it; besides that we have all of us a perpetual monitor within our own breasts, which awakens the dullest and checks the most impetuous.

From these considerations it follows, that all events must necessarily be in the hands of God. Infinite power can effect its own purposes; infinite wisdom will determine the seasons for extraordinary interpositions; mercy will soften the rigour of strict justice; otherwise, what seasons are there when we are not the objects of divine wrath and vengeance?

If yet neither individuals nor societies are protected or deserted, rewarded or punished, with that apparent precision and equality which we may presumptuously believe we understand, (taking upon ourselves not only to determine concerning the integrity or maliciousness of men's thoughts, but to estimate perfectly their perceptions of happiness or misery, in their private capacities; and to know the truth likewise, the equity and faithfulness of all the councils and measures of men collected into communities) still we should rest satisfied, that every seeming inconsistency will be solved in the end; and the revelation of another life through Jesus Christ should put an end to all vain speculations.

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But now, were the Providence of God certainly so limited to a future state, and could we mark no traces of particular Providence upon earth, the whole of our wishes and prayers for temporal blessings would be to no purpose. On the other hand, we see through the order of the whole creation, and of every part of it, a regularity and subserviency to proper ends, inconsistent with a supposal of God Almighty's not directing it perpetually; and especially in the rational part of the creation we see such fitnesses and propriety as leave no room to doubt of a moral government here; virtue in its nature accompanied with happiness, vice with misery; natural hopes of divine protection, which the mind is shocked at parting with, extending themselves through all nations, and by their universality inferring their truth; besides the reason of man, suggesting to him that He who is infinite reason itself will govern him according to the faculties with which He hath endowed him; not as dead matter incapable of merit or demerit, but as capable of being virtuous and just and merciful, or vicious, unjust and cruel. We see in His general Providence what He hath appointed to be the general consequences of our behaviour: and shall we not, must we not judge, that His extraordinary interpositions will be analogous to His ordinary government, as being founded in the same infinite and invariable perfections? Hence it is, that we are led to make our humble supplications to Him, for mercy, for support, for direction and assistance; and

and most certainly not led to this in vain, but knowing that *He careth for us*, and that He is *the blessed and only Potentate, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords*.

The application of this to our own circumstances is what remains to be made as the essential part of this day's solemnity.

First then, from whence arises public good or ill? General history teaches us that states rise or fall according to the virtues and vices of those who compose them; and it bears ample testimony against that pernicious principle, that private vices are public benefits. The Jewish history informs us that extraordinary judgments were at times inflicted for the sins of the people. And are we not at all times warranted in our expectations of somewhat of the same kind from the hands of the same God? A nation is to another nation as a single man to a single man; and therefore there are always such things as national virtues or crimes arising from that mutual relation which they have to one another. But, strictly speaking, those virtues or crimes are comprised in a narrow compass: justice and injustice may be conceived as including all: and these must entirely depend upon those who bear rule. By their conduct alone neighbouring states may be justified or condemned as to their reciprocal conduct. But we cannot be sure that God will judge in this respect as man may judge. We cannot be sure that in His sight the vices of the people will not be deemed national, and bring down national judgments. We should rather
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believe, that He will scarcely punish our enemies, if they live in His faith and fear, because their Princes are ambitious and perfidious; and scarcely protect us, when given up to vice and infidelity, be our Sovereign and his servants ever so just and faithful. So that even the justice of the grounds of war may be an insufficient plea for His assistance, unless it be supported by the piety and virtue of the bulk of the people. If therefore we really hope for the return of peace, let us remember that *when our ways shall please the Lord, He will make our enemies to be at peace with us.* It is in our present as in our everlasting concerns—*If God be for us, who can be against us?* If God be against us, to what purpose can we exert the greatest efforts of wisdom and courage? to what purpose are all the most warlike and skilful preparations? Vain are all human plans and endeavours. *God will scatter them all as with an east wind before the enemy.*

Farther. Contemplations upon this subject are proper at all times; but never more so than in those seasons set apart for a retirement from the *house of feasting*; and more particularly so, when the piety of Government hath added to the usual solemnity of the season its order for a general humiliation for our sins, and a general supplication for the averting of the evils under which we labour. And, notwithstanding the abundance of blessings which we have enjoyed amidst an unquiet world, plenty, commerce, concord, victory, yet still
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war is in itself an actual evil; nay it is an evil although it be successful. For humanity recoils at it, and is grieved at the effusion of blood. The bravest heart, if it be not unprincipled, (in which case I should much doubt the bravery of any heart) cannot review a field of battle without horror. We indeed sit at home and do not see those dismal scenes. Yet how many are there who feel and regret the loss of those who were dearest to them? The honour which they may have obtained to their own memories, and the service which they may have done to their country, are indeed alleviations of their friend's grief, but they are no more. In a civil view too, the expences of war are necessary; but yet they are an evil, an evil to be felt by us and by generations to come. Nor yet doth past success imply no future danger. Who can say that vengeance is not yet laid up in store for our sins? How do we know but that the swords of the enemy may be the more keen for being whetted with disappointment and disgrace?

We may remember that, in the manifold victories of one year, our late most gracious Sovereign told his people from the throne that he saw and adored the hand of Providence. What he adored he imitated, and offered peace to those whom he had been enabled to subdue. Justice was satisfied, and resentment was at an end. But the injurious are the last who forgive, and despair itself is sometimes productive of the most successful events. Arbitrary monarchs are apt to consult their own
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imaginary glory without much regard to their people's real happiness; and possibly upon these principles it is that our enemies have preferred the continuation of the miseries of war. May we defeat their attempts by endeavouring to render ourselves the proper objects of divine protection!

For consider once more, what happiness at home, what respect abroad, what reasonable hopes of the divine favour and protection a nation might enjoy, the great body of whose people should be accustomed to meditate upon God's Providence and their own duty; it being impossible to meditate upon them, with any degree of seriousness, and yet without a consequential regulation of our conduct, and an acquisition of virtuous habits. When we have done this, we may expect blessings with a modest confidence, and shall be ready to acquiesce under disappointments with patience and humility. For various are the dispensations of God; unsearchable are His judgments; nor always corresponding with men's pursuits, hopes, or prayers.

However, as His goodness can never fail in the last result of things, so we can never err in relying upon it. On the other hand we may err very materially either by despondency or exultation.

Many years have not passed since we suffered ourselves to sink deeply into the former, not without some reason, but not without much more weakness and passion. We had formidable enemies; were deserted by those
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whom we had befriended; felt the weight of our vices; apprehended the approach of our ruin; and then what did we? With great solemnity we humbled ourselves before God; retained some impressions of piety for a short time; and too soon returned into the old round of pleasures and dissipation of thought, which we had so much reason to deplore. From that state of despondency we were next to take care lest we should have risen to a worse state of exultation and presumption. God had done great things for us; He had blest our Sovereign's counsels and arms; He had confounded those of his enemies. And were our voices then tuned to Hallelujahs? Did we give God the praise? or were we too ready to say that *our own arm and our own strength had gotten us those victories?* That was too much our case — and presumption had its check. For in an unexpected instant, he, upon whose justice, upon whose wisdom, upon whose resolution the nations around us relied; he, whom long experience of the mildest government had endeared to his subjects; he, of whom we said *under his shadow we shall live*, was taken from us. — May the Almighty shower down the choicest blessings upon his Royal Successor, protecting him from his enemies, and rendering him happy in the affections and loyalty of a people, made virtuous by his example, and prosperous by his government!

Lastly, let this solemnity, attended by an intermission of business, a cessation from diversions, and a more than ordinary

ordinary abstinence from meats, engage us to abstract ourselves a little from the world, that so every man's mind may descend into itself, view its own proceedings, reflect with shame and sorrow upon what it shall find amiss, and determine to rectify all its disorders. And let our prayers be accompanied with great humility, and with a serious and deep sense of our ignorance and infirmities. For we shall presume too much in favour of our own knowledge, if we apprehend ourselves to be competent judges when and in what measure God will condescend to interpose his power in an extraordinary manner; and we shall equally presume too much in favour of our own virtue, if we believe ourselves to be more justly than others the objects of His immediate protection, unless we turn from our sins with earnestness and with perseverance,

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